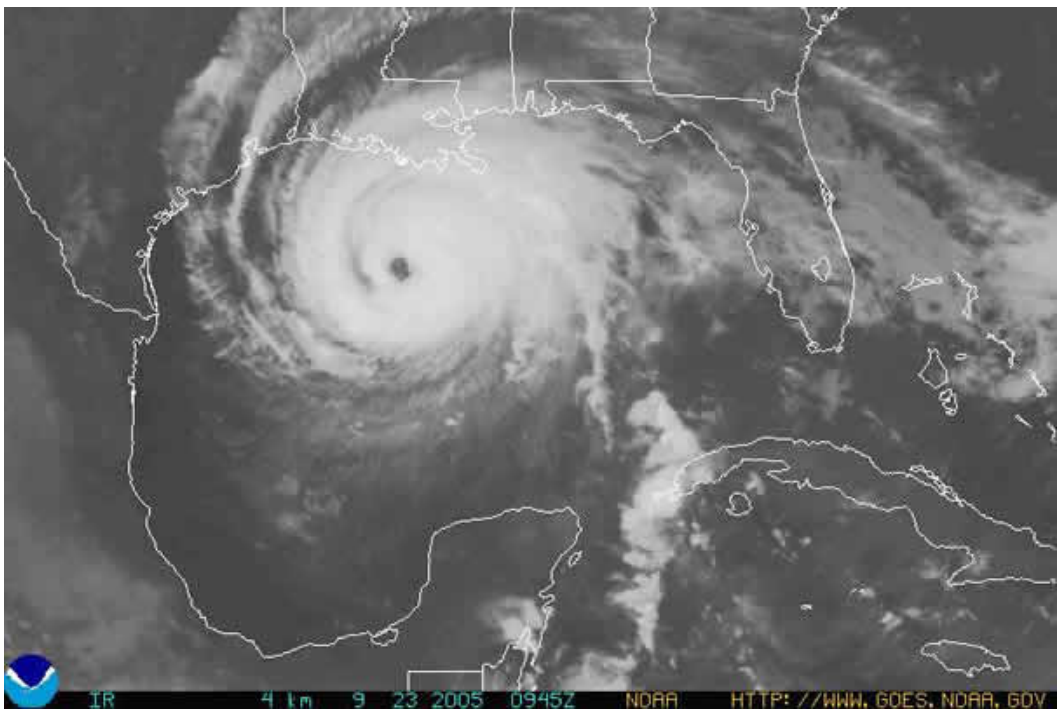
News release

Hurricane Rita update 1200

23 September 2005

Hurricane Rita has decreased in strength over the past 24 hours but remains an extremely dangerous category 4 hurricane. Sustained maximum wind speeds are close to 140 m.p.h. and hurricane force winds extend some 85 miles from the centre. Rita may perhaps weaken further to a category 3 storm before landfall, which is expected around 1200 UK time on Saturday close to the Texas/Louisiana state border. Nevertheless, extensive damage is still likely.



As well as the anticipated storm surge of anything up to six metres, forecasters are becoming increasingly concerned over the amount of rain over the next four to six days. As much as 20 to 25 inches (over 500 mm) could fall in the region as Rita stalls and begins to decay.

The 2005 tropical storm season for the Atlantic was predicted to be one of the most active, but this year could see a record number of storms. In early August, with the season already under way, Colorado State University issued a forecast for 20 tropical storms, 10 of which would reach hurricane level. So far there have been 17 tropical storms to date - Rita is the ninth hurricane.

Twenty-one storms were recorded in 1933, and the record number of hurricanes in one season is 12 in 1969. With the official end of the season at the end of November, and the fact that some storms have occurred as late as early December, it seems likely that these records could be toppled this year. With only 21 names nominated for each storm season it also means that the National Hurricane Center (NHC) in Miami will need to resort to using letters of the Greek alphabet should the record be broken.

Agencies and departments, including the Met Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office, are working closely together to give the best advice for anyone affected by the approaching hurricane.

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Notes:
Hurricane strength is defined on the Saffir-Simpson scale noted below:
Category 1 sustained wind speeds of 74 to 95 m.p.h.
Category 2 sustained wind speeds of 96 to 110 m.p.h.
Category 3 sustained wind speeds of 111 to 130 m.p.h.
Category 4 sustained wind speeds of 131 to 155 m.p.h.
Category 5 sustained wind speeds greater than 155 m.p.h.

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